



PROJECT MUSE®

Courting Krishna on the Banks of the Ganges: Gender and
Power in a Hindu Women's Ritual Tradition

Tracy Pintchman

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Volume
24, Number 1, 2004, pp. 23-32 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/181220>

Courting Krishna on the Banks of the Ganges: Gender and Power in a Hindu Women's Ritual Tradition

TRACY PINTCHMAN

A good amount of contemporary postcolonial scholarship has attempted to grapple with issues concerning women's power in non-Western cultures and ways of assessing such in a postcolonial context. Much of this scholarship is motivated by a desire to take seriously women's voices and experiences, which have been underrepresented in past scholarship, and to recognize and restore agency to groups that are generally understood to be marginal or oppressed. The study of religion has played an important role in this endeavor, largely as a response to Orientalist representations of religions other than Christianity as barbaric or "backward" in matters pertaining to women. All the discussion, however, has not resulted in consensus; instead, it has exposed clear fault lines. Some scholars prize cultural and religious pluralism and are suspicious of Western feminist discourse as a type of hegemonic "discursive colonialism" that simply continues the colonial project in measuring all cultures against Western values.¹ Others emphasize the need for feminist universals that can be applied cross-culturally, fearing that too much talk of women's power especially in traditional contexts tends to disregard the reality of the material oppression that women face.²

In this essay, I would like to take up the issue of women's empowerment in relation to one particular Hindu ritual tradition that I have been studying for the last several years. During the month of Kartik, which falls in the autumn (October-November), Hindu women living in and around the city of Benares in North India gather together daily to execute a type of ritual performance known as Kartik *pūja* ("Kartik ritual worship"). From 1995 to 1998, I participated in three different cycles of Kartik *pūja*. There is much that one could say about this tradition, and I have explored various aspects of it elsewhere.³ Here, however, I wish to focus specifically on questions pertaining to power. Is this tradition empowering to the women who take part in it, and if so, how? What might power mean in this context? And how do questions about women's empowerment in this particular tradition intersect with

larger debates about women's power in traditional Hinduism?

Adoring Krishna: Kartik *Pūja* in Benares

The Hindu month of Kartik is sandwiched between the hot and humid rainy season and the chilling cold that often comes in late December and January, when temperatures can fall near freezing at night.⁴ In the rather harsh climate of North India, Hindus tend to think of Kartik as a physically comfortable time when the natural world becomes benevolent and hospitable: the sky clears, the temperature is pleasant, the land is lush and green from the monsoon rains, ripening crops mature, and food is abundant. Kartik is also celebrated as a deeply sacred month, and many Benarsi Hindus with whom I spoke counted Kartik among the three or four most religiously important months of the year. A rich variety of ritual observances bring the month to life in people's homes, in temples, and along the *ghats*, the stepped platforms that run along the banks of the Ganges River at the edge of the city.

The key religious injunction pertaining to Kartik has to do with the maintenance of a religious practice known as the Kartik *vrāt* (Sanskrit *vrata*). The term *vrāt* is often translated as "vow" or "votive observance." *Vrāts* encompass a number of ritual elements, but they are most popularly associated with fasting. The Kartik *vrāt*, like other *vrāts*, entails abstention from certain foods.⁵ Even more central to this *vrāt*, however, is Kartik *snan*, daily ritual bathing throughout the month. In Benares, most Kartik votaries bathe in the Ganges River. Such ritual bathing is considered especially meritorious when performed before sunrise, so Kartik votaries tend to head for the river while most of the city is still asleep. Although both men and women may observe the strictures regarding this bathing, in Benares the majority of Kartik votaries are women.

After completing their ritual bath, women and girls who wish to do so gather in groups on the *ghats* to perform a special form of Kartik *pūja* as part of their observance of the Kartik *vrāt*. Not all female Kartik vota-

ries participate in Kartik *puja*, but as far as I could observe, all Kartik *puja* participants are female Kartik votaries. Participants construct several icons (*murtis*) of Hindu deities out of Ganges mud. Forming a circle around the icons, they perform *puja*, Hindu ritual worship, with the icons while singing songs particular to this occasion. Many deities are honored, but several of the songs focus specifically on Krishna, and informants told me that the worship is largely dedicated to Krishna with the other deities called to be present chiefly so that they, too, can participate as devotees.

Why Krishna? More than half of the thirty-six women whom I formally interviewed indicated that they consider Kartik *puja* to be in some way related to Krishna's *rasa-lila*, the famous circle dance of Krishna mythology, in which Krishna danced in the middle of a circle of cowherdesses, or *gopis*, making love with each of them. This erotic dance is considered by many Kartik *puja* participants to be the model for the *puja*. Some participants maintained that the *rasa-lila* took place during the month of Kartik, describing Kartik *puja* as a form of worship enacted in commemoration of the earthly *rasa-lila* performed in ancient times. Just as the cowherdesses gathered around Krishna in a circle in the original circle dance, so Kartik *puja* participants gather in a circle around icons of Krishna and other deities; and just as the cowherdesses adored Krishna with song and dance, *puja* participants worship him with song and devotional offerings. Informants also tended to use the term *rasa-lila* to refer to Krishna's entire youthful life in Vrindavan, the earthly home where he passed his childhood and youth.⁶ Participants understand their role in the *puja* as related to this more expansive sense of the term as well, comparable to that of the cowherdesses who cared for Krishna during all his years as a boy in Vrindavan. Within Kartik *puja*, this role takes on a progressive character, marking Krishna's development from infancy to adulthood and culminating in the arrangement and celebration of Krishna's marriage to the plant-goddess Tulsi, the auspicious basil plant used in Vaishnava worship.

In Kartik *puja*, Krishna is considered to be in child form for about the first twenty days of the month. During this period, when the daily *puja* comes to an end, participants gather together all the clay icons in the cloth on which the *puja* is performed. They then swing the baby Krishna, along with all the other deities, offering Krishna milk and singing a special song to pacify him. After this, the icons, cloth, and all items offered during the *puja* are immersed in the Ganges River, marking the end of the *puja*, and the women disperse. About two-thirds of the way through the month, however, there is a shift. A male priest is invited briefly into the worship circle to perform Krishna's *janen* or *upanayana*, the cere-

mony marking his investiture with the sacred thread and designating Krishna's transformation from child to young man. For this occasion, a brass image is used in place of the usual clay one. *Puja* participants bathe Krishna in Ganges water and turmeric, dress him in finery, and sing special songs related to the occasion. After the *janen*, Krishna is no longer thought to be a child. There is bawdy joking and dancing as women look forward to his impending marriage to Tulsi, which takes place several days later.

When the day of the marriage arrives, *puja* participants celebrate it with great fanfare. The marriage takes place on the eleventh day of Kartik's second fortnight, a day known as Prabhodani Ekadashi, when the deity Vishnu is said to awaken from his annual slumber during the inauspicious four months of the rainy season (the *aturmasa*).⁷ Sanskrit texts highlight Vishnu's awakening, and many Benarsis, including many of the women who participate in Kartik *puja*, commemorate it in homes and temples all over the city. Yet Kartik *puja* does not mark this event at all, stressing instead the marriage of Krishna and Tulsi. Since women control and shape Kartik *puja* traditions, these traditions tend to reflect women's values and concerns. For Hindu women marriage tends to be a highly significant event. Marriage effects a total transformation on the identity of a traditional Hindu bride, who leaves her own home for a new one, exchanging her natal family for her husband's family. Men do not move or leave their families behind; nor is male identity marked by marriage in the same way that female identity is. Hence marriage is not nearly as transformative for men as it is for women. As marriage tends to be the focus of many Hindu women's lives, in Kartik *puja* Tulsi's wedding becomes the focus of the entire month. The wedding also marks the beginning of the marriage season in North India. Indeed, this divine marriage functions as a type of "first fruits" offering; just as one should offer the first grains of one's harvest to God before partaking oneself, so the first marriage arranged every season is for God, with humans only partaking afterwards.

During the final days of Kartik following the marriage of Krishna and Tulsi, women's daily worship continues, but wedding songs are no longer sung, and no clay images are made. Instead, the *puja* is done with a plastic or metal box, said to contain the religious merit that participants have accumulated during the month by their participation in the Kartik *vrat* and *puja*. Many Kartik *puja* participants maintain that Tulsi does not depart with her new husband for her *sasural*—the home of the groom's parents, where the bride will now take up residence with her new husband—until the last night of Kartik, the night of the full moon, when the bride and groom also consummate their marriage.

Kartik *Puja* and Women's Empowerment

Is Kartik *puja* empowering to women who participate in it? How might one begin to answer this question? Other scholars, of course, have addressed issues of gender and power in relation to women in Hinduism. One way that these issues have been approached is in terms of hegemonic and subordinate groups and the struggles that can emerge between them. Predominant structures and ideologies in Hinduism and Indian culture, like other religions and cultures, are largely patriarchal and tend to discriminate against women in a number of ways. Yet Indian women may circumvent, subvert, manipulate, or contest male authority in a variety of ways, even when they do not openly challenge the legitimacy of that authority. The last dozen years or so have given rise to a flood of scholarship about women's resistance to patriarchal ideologies and structures of male power in not just Hinduism and India, but in a variety of traditions, cultures, and contexts, through songs, stories, and other forms of speech as well as through religious practices.⁸

While concerns about struggle or the dynamics of social dominance/resistance to domination certainly can be helpful for thinking about women's empowerment in traditional religious contexts, I would argue that the term "resistance" has been used overly broadly and in an unnuanced way to encompass too many types of discourses and practices. In particular, discussions of "resistance" tend sometimes to lump together alternative discourses, practices, representations, ideologies, and so forth that do not conform to those associated with institutionally dominant groups with teleological discourses and practices that concretely envision or advocate an end goal of social change.⁹ More subtlety may well be warranted here. Scholars of women and religion in many contexts have observed that women tend to reinterpret or reconfigure predominant religious practices and ideologies in ways that reflect women's specific values and experiences.¹⁰ But to refer to most or all of such reconfigurations as "resistance" is, I think, to dilute significantly the meaning of that term.

Issues of gender hegemony, furthermore, including questions of compliance with and resistance to male authority and hegemonic structures and codes, are rarely straightforward. They are certainly not straightforward when it comes to Indian culture. The model of male dominance/female subordination is too simple and unnuanced to be applied across the board to all situations; frequently what is going on in gender relationships in specific, lived contexts is much more

complex. Lina Gupta observes that Hindu women's status is influenced by many variables, so it is problematic to apply any pat dichotomy to issues regarding Hindu women and power.¹¹ Usha Menon, for example, notes that women who are senior within a family often enjoy a good deal of authority, and they may with impunity engage in certain displays of discontent and refusal to cooperate with male family members. Menon describes these displays not as acts of resistance by dominated individuals but as "explicit expressions of power by dominant women."¹² Economic status, individual personality and living situation, caste, age, region, and other factors all come into play. Furthermore, issues concerning resistance to/compliance with dominant social codes are frequently complex and intertwined, so it is sometimes misleading to classify particular actions or behaviors as either compliant or resistant whole-cloth. In her work on Hindu women's domestic rituals in South India, for example, Mary Hancock explores ways that domestic ritual practice acts, simultaneously, as a site for both "reproduction of and resistance to hegemonic images of female subjectivity" in Sanskrit Hinduism.¹³

In terms of traditional gender roles in Indian society, Kartik *puja* is a socially conservative tradition that does not challenge the central importance of the wife and mother roles in Hindu women's lives but instead reinforces the importance of these roles. Judith Butler has argued that gender is primarily performative, and that gender identity is constituted through a stylized repetition of acts.¹⁴ In this regard, Kartik *puja* functions to affirm traditional ideals of Hindu womanhood that emphasize an alliance between women and the domestic sphere. Simultaneously, however, Kartik *puja* affords women an opportunity to gather outside the home in a public space that is female-controlled, and it provides women nearly exclusive liturgical authority within this space. In such ways, one could understand Kartik *puja* traditions, like the domestic rituals that Hancock explores, to be acting simultaneously as a site for both "reproduction of and resistance to hegemonic images of female subjectivity" prevalent in Sanskrit Hinduism.

Furthermore, power is a malleable concept; power takes many forms, and religion may empower women in a variety of ways that are perhaps not always best described in terms of struggle or resistance. For example, Susan Wadley explores five rituals that Hindu women practice in Karimpur, North India, concluding that such rituals

may give psychological support to the women themselves because they allow women to have active control of events rather than depend completely on their male kin. ... The rituals performed by Karimpur's women clearly reflect the women's social world—the

world of the family and household. Their attempts to have active control over these most important facets of their lives may in fact be most critical for our understanding of Karimpur's women's rituals.¹⁵

Wadley does not use language of empowerment specifically in speaking of Hindu women's religious rites, stressing instead the "psychological support" they offer in enabling women to feel they have active control over events that are important to them. In her work on women's rituals, however, Anne Mackenzie Pearson does specifically invoke language of empowerment. Pearson explores in particular Hindu women's votive rituals (*vrats*), a category that would include the Kartik *vrat* and its accompanying *puja*. Like Wadley, Pearson concludes that "women use *vrats* as a way to gain control over their own lives." But she goes on to argue that *vrats* are indeed a source of empowerment for women in two ways: first, by providing them with a degree of personal autonomy; and second, by tapping into traditional religious notions of power (*tapas* and *sakti*) cultivated through ascetic practice.¹⁶ Through the practice of *vrats* Hindu women, "traditionally denied access to formal asceticism, have found a way to tap into this powerful realm for their own benefit."¹⁷

In speaking of the interface between religious practice and women's empowerment, some scholars have addressed explicitly what they mean or do not mean to circumscribe when they invoke "power" language, being careful to limit their claims. In an essay exploring the life of Tara Devi, a woman who becomes a human vehicle of the Goddess, for example, Kathleen Erndl emphasizes that the type of power she wishes to address is specifically spiritual or religious power. As the Goddess' vehicle, Tara Devi becomes a "vehicle for dispensing the Goddess' grace and healing power" with a "never-ending stream of pilgrims, most of whom hear about her through word of mouth, showing up at her door."¹⁸ Erndl concludes that Tara Devi gains "immense personal power" through her relationship with the Goddess, a power that "does not end with a sense of personal self-worth," which Wadley emphasizes, but is "also acknowledged in the community."¹⁹ Nevertheless, Erndl notes that her own emphasis on Tara Devi's religious empowerment does not intend to "downplay the subordination of women either in Hindu hegemonic discourse or in the economic, social, or educational realms of Indian society."²⁰

In a similar vein, Ann Gold explores a cycle of springtime rituals in which, she maintains, Hindu women celebrate female power, both "demonic and divine," and in so doing "make claims for female worth and community that run counter to male-authored devaluations and fragmentations."²¹ She describes con-

ceptualizations of gender evident in women's celebrations as "counterpoints" that offer "both blunt and subtle denials of a dominant male-authored discourse of female devaluation and subordination."²² She notes, however, that it is not her intention to argue that "women's counterpoint claims give them any significant advantages in economic or political realms."²³ Gupta contrasts notions of power that denote physical or socio-political power with the traditional Hindu concept of power as an inner, spiritual power essential to human evolution.²⁴ She argues that Hindu women's performance of prescribed rituals functions to cultivate and augment such inner, religious power, increasing women's power overall.

Clearly when scholars of women and religion speak of power and empowerment in these contexts, they refer to a wide variety of forms that power may take. They may invoke, among other things, notions of divine or transcendent power, inner spiritual power, enhanced prestige or influence in the community, increased autonomy, sense of personal or collective female self-worth, or special authority in relation to a specific religious tradition or sphere. The term encompasses a range of meanings, and empowerment in one sphere might have no effect on, or might even diminish, power in another sphere. Women may derive a sense of empowerment through religious practice even when that power has nothing to do with resistance to patriarchal structures or women's economic, social, or political advancement in the public sphere; or feelings of religious empowerment might even mitigate against social or economic empowerment rather than contribute to it. What kind of power matters most to an individual might depend more on that person's most cherished values and commitments than on a "correct" understanding of what constitutes "real" power. Hence a religious conservative may legitimately profess to feeling empowered by a practice that a secular feminist experiences and interprets as profoundly disempowering. The two would likely be operating out of different value systems, priorities, and commitments regarding women's empowerment and hence would have fundamentally different descriptive accounts of what constitutes real or vital power.

In making such claims, I do not wish to imply that anything goes when it comes to questions of women and power. Women's reports of feeling empowered by religious practice do not, and cannot, override or compensate for a lack of social, economic, or political empowerment, and it would be misleading to invoke such reports to conceal, ignore, minimize, or deny specific forms of women's oppression in spheres where such exists. On the other hand, even within contexts marked by institutionalized male hegemony, such

reports should not simply be dismissed as forms of “false consciousness” or self-delusion, which would indicate a lack of serious engagement with women’s experiential claims.

Marjorie Proctor-Smith makes an important distinction in this regard between what she calls the emancipatory function of religion with respect to women, in which religion helps women transcend existing social restraints and behave in ways that are contrary to social expectation, and a sacralizing function, in which religion serves to affirm women’s traditional roles and experiences as sacred.²⁵ While the sacralizing function can serve to justify traditions that limit women’s power and freedom in both public and private spheres, at its best it may serve to reveal “the dignity and holiness of women’s work.”²⁶ By sacralizing women’s roles, religious practices may function to enhance women’s self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, empowering women psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually even when the emancipatory function is largely or completely absent.

My own engagement with these issues leads me toward prizing thick description when it comes to women, religion, and power, approaching questions of power in ways that respect women’s experiential claims while situating them in descriptive and analytic frameworks that recognize power as multidimensional, situational, and shifting. Here I find helpful A. K. Ramanujan’s well-known description of Indian culture as tending to be “context-sensitive” more than “context-free.”²⁷ Ramanujan borrows this formulation from the rules of formal grammar. While some grammatical formulations are context-free (e.g., sentences must have a subject and predicate regardless of the context), others are context-sensitive (e.g., how to indicate a plural depends on the particular term: “dog” becomes “dogs,” but “child” becomes “children”). He concludes that Indian culture tends to be governed more by context-sensitive rules than by those that are context-free.²⁸ I would suggest that women’s power, too, manifests itself in Indian culture and Hindu religious practice in ways that tend to be context-sensitive, and claims about women’s empowerment are most persuasive when they are qualified and richly contextualized. The challenge to scholars is to situate clearly and describe adequately the nature of women’s power in diverse particular contexts, including the boundaries and limits of that power.

In terms of Kartik *puja*, certainly not all women who participate in this tradition feel empowered by it. Indeed, at least one of the participants I observed over the course of my research appeared to have been dragged along by female in-laws and did not seem the least bit interested in participating in the *puja* in any meaningful way. This participant may well have

experienced the *puja* as overwhelmingly disempowering, since she seemed to be participating largely against her will. But, I would argue, some participants may well experience Kartik *puja* as empowering in a number of ways.

Kartik *puja* provides a forum for sacralizing women’s values, roles, and experiences as potential or actual brides, wives, and mothers. The tradition as a whole helps render these values, roles, and experiences especially significant by enacting them on a sacred stage, relating them to a transcendent model. It provides women with a ritual space in which they may experience collectively emotions surrounding family and marriage in a way that acknowledges and honors the importance of these emotions and their centrality in women’s lives. Extra-domestic ties with other women tend to be an important source of power and value for women in societies that hold to a firm division between male and female roles, and Kartik *puja* facilitates the creation of such ties by enabling women to meet other women from around the city.²⁹ The *puja* also provides women a chance to exercise religious agency and expertise outside of the home, and it affords women the opportunity to assume positions of ritual authority.

The women who celebrate Kartik *puja* function in a highly gender-segregated world, and the separation of the sexes seems to contribute to women’s experience of empowerment in this context. In her study of women’s religions, Susan Sered proposes that downplaying gender difference may actually result in a devaluation of women. She observes that female-dominated religions tend to stress rather than play down gender differences, accepting non-egalitarian views of gender. In such contexts, however, women tend to reinterpret prevailing views of gender differences, considering the sphere that women control to be as good as or even better than the male sphere.³⁰ In religions that tend to be dominated institutionally by men, patterns of gender segregation may function similarly to provide women with clearly delineated spheres of responsibility, influence, and control, which may in turn help enhance women’s sense of significance and self-worth.³¹ Brenda E. Brasher, for example, notes that while congregational life in the two American fundamentalist Christian congregations she explores is male-dominated overall, women participate in women-only ministry programs that establish and nurture “female enclaves, separate, sociocultural networks of women.”³² These enclaves, Brasher concludes, thrive because they serve to “empower women” by establishing a parallel symbolic world in which women can be “fully contributing participants.” The type of power to which she refers is, says Brasher, both personal and congregational.³³

In a similar vein, I would propose that Kartik *puja* traditions, like many other Hindu *vrata* and devotional traditions, function to empower women religiously by providing women with a clearly delineated sphere of meaningful religious responsibility and authority that they and they alone control. Kartik *puja* traditions also function to enhance many women's sense of gender virtue, affirming the value of what participants tend to perceive to be both women's ordained sphere of labor and women's inherent nature. I make this latter claim based on a number of formal interviews with *puja* participants that I conducted during the three years (1995–1998) that I was in Benares engaging in field research for this project. When I conducted these interviews, one of the questions I asked was “Why is the *puja* for women only? Why don't men participate?” When I asked this question, I expected to be told that only women do this *puja* because the cowherdesses, who serve as the role models for participants, were female, so those humans who participate in the *puja* must also be female. However, among thirty-six informants who responded directly to this question in 1995 and 1997–1998, only seven invoked the cowherdesses' femaleness, and of these seven only two emphasized it.³⁴ More informants (eleven) emphasized the division of labor between men and women in the family. But the largest number—twenty-four respondents (sixty-seven per cent)—invoked differences between men's and women's natures and social roles in ways that clearly favored women as the superior gender. For many *puja* participants, the fact that women and not men engage in this form of religious practice has to do with the inherent differences between women and men, differences that affirm women's worth and the seriousness of women's responsibilities over those of men.

With respect to the division of labor between women and men, some of the women I spoke with emphasized the role of men as breadwinners. When I asked, “Why don't men participate in Kartik *puja*?” I was told that men are busy in their jobs, which is their main sphere of concern, and hence do not have time to devote to things like household matters and religion. Religion is the job of women. Some informants also related this division of labor to the widely held notion that women's husbands reap the benefits of their wives' religious actions, and vice-versa. Since men have to work, women attend to religious matters and transfer half of the benefit to the men. This way, both can gain religious merit without any disruption to the man's job.

Women who invoked this division of labor to explain men's lack of participation in Kartik *puja* tended to say little else about it. Some, however, expressed impatience with what they perceive to be an unequal distribution of the workload that places too much responsibility on the

shoulders of women. One young widow from Rajasthan whom I interviewed in 1997 clearly thinks that men have it too easy. She told me, “Men go and earn outside and bring the money home. But who will manage it? Women will manage it. Whom will a woman feed first? The elders in the family, her husband, her son, her daughter, and guests if there are any, a beggar if there is one. If a man has money, he will go and eat in a restaurant. He cannot deal with all this stuff. So this is why women are superior, because God [Bhagavan] did not give men as much strength [*sakti*] as he gave [women].” This participant portrays men's role as breadwinners as only one brief stage in a lengthy chain of responsibility in caring for others. Women have a much more burdensome task in managing the rest of the process and attending to all family members and others in need, tasks that men are incapable of performing, and she perceives women's ability to carry out these tasks as signs of their inherent superiority. Similar sentiments were also expressed by another informant who claimed, “Men cannot do as much work as women can do. For example, suppose you do your housework properly in your home. Then suppose that for one day you leave your house; a man cannot keep the house properly. He will just eat and then go and earn money. Men cannot do what women do. God [Bhagavan] has made them like this.”

Another *puja* participant, Savitri, also expressed impatience with what she seemed to perceive as an unfair division of labor between men and women.³⁵ At the time that I first interviewed her in 1995, Savitri was sixteen years old and unmarried (she was still unmarried when I last saw her in February of 1998). She had been observing Kartik *vrata* and *puja* traditions since 1990, primarily for the purpose of obtaining a good husband and family of in-laws in the future. In responding to my question about male non-participation in Kartik *puja*, she remarked, “Girls will have to look after a house, a family—they have to take care of the entire household. Right now girls [my age] are free, but later on, this and that keep coming, and they have to take care of this and that. And what do the boys have to do? Their only concern is to work and earn. Besides this they have nothing else to do.” Savitri appears to think that working a job to earn money is not very burdensome. Women's work, on the other hand, is much more onerous. Not only must women care for the entire household, juggling “this and that” at every turn, they must also undertake *vrats* and other rituals in order to insure the well-being of the entire family. While Savitri seemed happy to leave the workplace to men, she did express concern that men do not take enough responsibility for the religious activities that ensure the well-being of the family. She went on to tell me, “Men ought to help somewhat in religious work. The thing is that within the family, they separate the tasks. If you do

lots of *puja*, then the effect can benefit the children . . . [so] both men and women should do a little bit, so that our children will be well.”

Savitri’s response highlights the connection between women’s performance of *vrats* and *puja*—which can bring benefits to self, spouse, and children—and a general concern for the well-being of family and household. Gayatri, an older woman who has observed Kartik *puja* for most of her adult life, also makes this connection, and conversely sees in men’s lack of participation in such rituals a lack of concern for the domestic sphere. She remarks, “Every woman has the desire that ‘I should get a good husband, he should be well, I should have sons, and the sons should live. I should get wealth.’ Men don’t care about these things that much. Men don’t think, ‘I should have this kind of wife,’ or ‘I should have a son or a daughter.’ They don’t think about these things that much. Women care more about everything.”

The *puja* participants quoted above see men’s lack of participation in Kartik *puja* primarily in relation to a division of labor in the family that some view as problematic, letting men off the hook too easily. For other women, however, the fact that men do not participate in Kartik *puja* is directly related to their inherent laziness, their lack of discipline in getting up early in the morning, and their inability to sit patiently for long periods of time—all qualities that mitigate against their ability to participate in this form of worship. When I asked one long-time participant, Kusumlata, why men did not participate in Kartik *puja*, for example, she told me simply, “In Benares, men are lazy. They cannot get up early, and they will say, ‘We are not going to do this hypocritical crap.’” In a similar vein, one older woman, a long-time observer of Kartik, threw her hands into the air in response to my questions and asserted: “The way women sit down and do *puja*—men will not do this much. Men cannot sit that long. They will say, ‘Let’s go home’ [*calo-gbar!*]. The most they will do is offer water. But we offer Bel leaves, water, turmeric, sandalwood paste, rice, and flowers. Men would not offer that much.”

Other women invoked additional shortcomings that prevent male participation as well. One participant, for example, complained, “Men can’t sing. Men can’t tell stories. Women do all this. . . . [Men] don’t care about singing songs. So you won’t see any men in this *puja*. It is ours. Men will just get up in the morning and bathe, and then they will say, ‘Give me food; I have to go to the office.’ That’s it [*bas!*].” Speculating about what would happen if men did participate, another informant, Sashikala, expressed similar concerns about male lack of skill and creativity, noting, “Suppose that they made their own group—then they couldn’t sing,

because men cannot sing properly, and they can’t tell stories. They can only read books and do *puja* outside [in temples].”

Yet other women I interviewed also claimed that men are inherently less religious than women or just lack appreciation for religion and religious ritual in general. One Kartik participant for example, stated to me flatly, “Men don’t have as much interest in *puja* as women have. Men are like dolls. They just stand there.” Kusumlata, the participant who assured me that “in Benares, men are lazy,” also proclaimed that “in India, women are more religious [*dharmic*]” than men, a view that is widely held by Hindus living all over India. Another participant confirmed men’s irreligiosity in stating, “Men don’t believe as much as we do. They won’t do as much *tapas* [austerity] as we do.” And a housewife named Kamlesh told me, “Men do not have any feeling [*bhavana*] for religious worship [*puja-patb*]. Some men who have some feeling come and do some *puja*, but most men are unable to sit still.”

Several participants explained the differences between men’s and women’s religiosity by correlating qualities that women develop in their domestic roles with their heightened religious sensibility. Seymour notes that Indian women tend to view life as a progression of changing roles in which “‘personal growth’ constitutes becoming increasingly embedded in familial relationships and responsibilities, not in achieving autonomy and independence from others.”³⁶ In this regard, several of the women I interviewed correlated ability and willingness to be responsible for familial others with enhanced religious virtuosity. Tulsa Devi, for example, notes, “Women get married, they have kids; men do not invest any time in household things. It’s the same thing with *puja*. Men go there, but they will stand outside with hands folded; they will not do the *puja* like us. Men don’t like *puja* very much.” Bhagavanti compared motherhood to doing *puja*, explaining, “We give birth to a child, we put oil on the child’s body, we massage the child. Men can’t do all this. So *puja* is like this. Men cannot do as much as we do. They cannot do it according to the rules.” Hem Kumari portrayed motherhood and concern for children’s welfare as the source of women’s religiosity, noting “Mothers are considered supreme because they give birth to children, nurture them, bring them up, and teach them how to walk. . . . That is why mothers are always supreme, because they take so much trouble to bring up children, and they give birth. That is why God is always behind them, to protect them. [And] that is why [they are more religious], because women have to bear most of the pain. If a child gets sick, they are the ones who bear the brunt of it.”

Whereas Savitri and Gayatri, quoted above, lamented the fact that men do not take much of a role in the religious activities like Kartik *puja* that would enhance their families' well-being, those who communicated a negative view of men's religious discipline tended to portray men as "wet blankets" who would only spoil the *puja* for the women if they were to participate. One day in 1995 when I was having tea with two participants, Kamlesh and Tulsa Devi, I asked them if they found it convenient that men do not participate in Kartik *puja*. Kamlesh noted, "Yes, if the men don't take part in the *puja*, this is very convenient for us. If men sit with us, there are constraints. They say, 'Hurry up! Let's go!' and we feel anxious." Tulsa Devi affirmed Kamlesh's remarks, noting, "You feel like walking around, and your husband is there, then he says, 'Hurry up! Let's go! Let's go, let's go!' So here's the thing; when the men are with you, they do what they want to do. We cannot do what *we* want to do." Kamlesh then responded, "So, for example, if men are sitting there, and we feel like dancing or singing, and men are sitting there, then how can we do it? If men were there, how could we dance? We'd be repressed, afraid, and ashamed. And if you are by yourself, then you sing, jump, and dance a lot."

On one level, as Kamlesh notes, they like the fact that men are not around because women are freed from constraints imposed by modesty, and they are able to act in ways that they could not if men were observing them. But this is not the only reason. Underlying their remarks appears to be an understanding that men are impatient and lacking religious feeling, and they predict that if men were to participate, they would force their wives to cut the *puja* short. Another informant echoed such sentiments in a different conversation, remarking, "With men, there is pressure. There is a burden. They would keep interrupting us, saying, 'Hurry up! Hurry up! Let's go!'" Chandni Devi gave a similar response when I asked her, too, if she found it convenient that men do not take part in the *puja*, only she emphasized the demands that men place on women with respect to domestic chores. With an enthusiastic "yes," she explained to me, "The reason is that women think, 'There are no men, so let's sing together, and play together.' Otherwise at home men always scream, 'You go and spend so much time in your *puja*, and we don't get our food on time—our lunch and dinner. None of the work in the house is getting done on time.' This is what they keep screaming. All the men scream, 'You were late, you were late [last time]! Come back quickly [this time]! The children have to go to school.'" Chandni Devi appears to think that men care more about their meals and schedules than they do about religious observance.

Of the thirty-six informants that I interviewed, only

two described perceived distinctions between men's and women's attitudes and behaviors as primarily a result of custom (*ri'raj*) or habit (*adat*). Among the informants who addressed this issue, most attributed such distinctions to differences in men's and women's inherent nature (*svabha*). One informant, for example, Ramavati, in describing why women like *puja* more than men responded to my question "Is this just habit?" by insisting, "This is not habit; this is how it has been inscribed in the house of God [Bhagavan]." Similarly, Tulsa Devi commented, "Men are more attached to their business and earning so they give less time to *puja*. This is their nature [*bha*]." Another informant, in explaining why men don't like to do *puja* proclaimed, "From the very beginning it is like that. Men are like that from the beginning [of their lives]. That is their nature [*svabha*]; it has always been like that." When my research associate, Sunita, then asked, "Are women by nature more religious than men?" she responded, "Yes, yes, yes! Women always walk on the path of religion [*dharm*] more than men. By nature [*svabha*], men don't have as much religious feeling as women do. By their nature women will do *puja*; even if their husbands forbid them to do it, they will do it."

Sered notes that in female-dominated religions, sexist ideas concerning gender are reinterpreted "as evidence of women's greater interest in, or talent for, religious activity."³⁷ This seems to be the case also with respect to Kartik *puja*. For the women I interviewed, there are two primary ways to explain men's lack of participation in Kartik *puja*. Several women suggested that within the family, the primary role of men—their *dharma* (duty) as husbands and fathers—is economic; they are wage-earners, and making money has nothing to do with votive rites or religious devotion. A majority, however, associate men's absence from the *puja* with inherent male traits, which they contrast—explicitly or implicitly—in a rather negative way with women's traits; men are lazy, too lazy to get up for an early *puja* (but, it is implied, women are not lazy, since they do in fact get up early for the *puja*); men are impatient and hence lack the discipline to sit through a long *puja* (which, by the way, women manage to sit through every day for a month); men are unable to sing or tell stories, basic skills required in many forms of Hindu religious devotion (but women can do this); men are not religious (but women are). These descriptions of men's nature are critical and rather negative in tone, suggesting that at least in the area of religious observance, men are flawed, and the inherent nature of males renders them less capable than women.

Had the context been different—had I asked directly, for example, "What are men like?" or "What are women like?" without connecting such questions to issues of

religious observance—I might well have gotten completely different answers. We all hold multiple and frequently contradictory views of the opposite gender, and different contexts might evoke differing proclamations about what the other gender is like. Hence the views that emerged in response to my questions are probably not the only perspectives on men that these women have to offer. But informants who responded to my questions took their cues from the context. Those who participate in Kartik *puja* value it highly. Since observing Kartik *puja* is such a good thing to do, and yet only women do it, it seems reasonable to assume that there is some inherent defect in males that helps explain why they don't also take part.

In her book *Pierced by Murugan's Lance*, Elizabeth Collins reminds us that “social relations encoded in ritual are not simply relations of domination; rituals also represent conceptions of respect and communality and moral obligations that those of high status may have to care for their dependents.”³⁸ In other words, rituals have to do not just with relations of social power, but also with ethical values. Many women who participate in Kartik *puja* clearly describe their participation as an ethically valorized activity that expresses and reflects the inherent virtue and strength of their gender. Their proclamations of female value provide a moral framework of self-evaluation in which women claim superiority for themselves.

There is little doubt that women in India, like women around the world, do not enjoy the same political, economic, social, or educational advantages that men in India enjoy. Indian women, like women around the world, tend to suffer forms of oppression that are gender-based. Many of the scriptures, institutions, and traditions of Hinduism, like those of many other religious traditions, tend to reflect male biases that devalue women, marginalize them, or exclude them from positions of institutional power and authority. But this does not mean that Hindu women living in India merely reproduce male hegemonic norms and ideologies, nor does it mean that they think of or experience their traditions as monolithically oppressive. Culture is not a power that determines people's actions and thoughts, but a context in which subjects act, and subjects are capable of interpreting and reconstructing their identities within the cultural contexts to which they have access.³⁹ Through their participation in Kartik *puja* traditions, Hindu women construct and reconstruct their own identities as strong, valued beings, empowered by both their cultural traditions and their female natures.

NOTES

This essay is based on the conclusion to my forthcoming

book on Kartik *puja*, *Guests at God's Wedding: Celebrating Kartik among the Women of Benares* (New York: State University of New York Press). Support for this project was supplied by the American Institute of Indian Studies, the National Endowment of the Humanities, the American Academy of Religion, Loyola University of Chicago, and Harvard University, which granted me a position as research associate and visiting lecturer in the Women's Studies in Religion Program in 2000–2001 so that I could work intensively on this project. I am deeply grateful to all these organizations and institutions for their support.

Very special thanks to Sunita Singh, dear friend and research associate, without whom I could not have conducted the research on which this essay is based. Special thanks as well to my husband, William C. French, who helped me conduct interviews and collect film footage of Kartik and Kartik *puja* in autumn of 1998.

¹See, for example, Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61–88.

²See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³For more on Kartik and Kartik *puja*, see Tracy Pintchman, “Kartik as a Vaisnava *Mabotsar*: Mythic Themes and the Ocean of Milk,” *Journal of Vaisnava Studies* 7:2 (1999): 65–92; and “The Month of Kartik and Women's Ritual Devotions to Krishna in Benares,” *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 327–342.

⁴The traditional Hindu calendar consists of twelve lunar months. In Benares, as in most of North India, these months are measured from full moon to full moon. When measured against the solar calendar commonly used in the West, the first day of Kartik usually falls sometime in mid-October, although this varies from year to year. Normal discrepancies between lunar and solar calendars mean that dates calculated by the solar calendar will not consistently correspond year after year to particular dates calculated by the lunar calendar.

⁵“Fasting” in Hinduism encompasses a wide variety of food abstinence practices, from complete abstinence from all food and drink to abstinence from a single type of edible product.

⁶In John S. Hawley's research on *rasa-lila* performances in Braj, the term *rasa-lila* is also used to indicate both the *rasa-lila* episode itself and the entire “play” (*lila*) of Krishna's life enacted in liturgical drama. See John S. Hawley, *At Play With Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas From Brindavan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), and *Krishna, The Butler Thief* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), chaps. 6 and 7.

⁷Each lunar month of the Hindu calendar is divided into two fortnights: the “dark” or “waning” fortnight, which constitutes the period of time from the end of a full moon to the end of the following new moon; and the “light” or “waxing” fortnight, which begins right after a new moon and concludes with a full moon. Each fortnight, in turn, consists of fifteen lunar days or *tithis*. A *tithi* is defined as the time that it takes for the moon to move twelve degrees around the earth. What

is often very confusing to those unfamiliar with the Hindu calendar is that *tithi* is often translated as "day," but it is not the same length as a solar day. A solar day lasts from one sunrise to the next sunrise. But a *tithi*, which is based on the moon's movement, can last anywhere from twenty-two to twenty-six hours.

⁸See, for example, Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Anne Grodzins Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Nita Kumar, ed., *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994); Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17:1 (February 1990): 41-55; and Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁹I am grateful to fellow scholar Steven Heim who, in a personal conversation, articulated to me this distinction between alternative and telcological discourses, both of which are often cited as "resistance". Raheja and Gold's *Listen to the Heron's Words* is an example of a work that, while commendable in numerous ways, seems to me to blur the line too much between these two types of discourse.

¹⁰See, for example, Susan Starr Sered, *Women as Ritual Expert* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated By Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); also Leslie Northrup, *Ritualizing Women* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1997).

¹¹Lina Gupta, "Hindu Women and Ritual Empowerment," in *Women and Goddess Traditions in Antiquity and Today*, ed. Karen King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 85.

¹²Usha Menon, "Does Feminism Have Universal Relevance? The Challenges Posed by Oriya Hindu Family Practices," *Daedalus* 129:4 (Fall 2000), 91.

¹³Mary Elizabeth Hancock, *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999), 32.

¹⁴Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 171-80.

¹⁵Susan Wadley, "Hindu Women's Family and Household Rites in a North Indian Village," in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Nancy A. Falk and Rita M. Gross (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 109.

¹⁶Anne Mackenzie Pearson, "Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind": *Ritual Fasts in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996), 10.

¹⁷Pearson, "Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind," 11.

¹⁸Kathleen Erndl, "The Goddess and Women's Power: A Hindu Case Study," in *Women and Goddess Traditions in Antiquity and Today*, 27.

¹⁹Erndl, "The Goddess and Women's Power," 30.

²⁰Erndl, "The Goddess and Women's Power," 19.

²¹Anne Grodzins Gold, "From Demon Aunt to Gorgeous Bride: Women Portray Female Power in a North Indian Festival Cycle," in *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion, and Politics in India*, ed. Julia Leslie and Mary McGee (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 213.

²²Gold, "From Demon Aunt to Gorgeous Bride," 226.

²³Gold, "From Demon Aunt to Gorgeous Bride," 227.

²⁴Gupta, "Hindu Women and Ritual Empowerment," 85-86. Gupta describes these as Western vs. Hindu concepts of power, but I find this dichotomy misleading. Clearly Hindu culture and religion embrace notions of physical and socio-political power, and Western notions of inner or spiritual power are not that different from those expounded in traditional Hinduism. "Secular" vs. "religious" might be a more helpful way of contrasting these differing concepts of power, although that dichotomy, too, is somewhat misleading.

²⁵Marjorie Proctor-Smith, "In the Line of the Female: Shakerism and Feminism," in *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 25-28.

²⁶Proctor-Smith, "In the Line of the Female," 28.

²⁷A. K. Ramanujan, "Is there an Indian way of thinking? An informal essay," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23:1 (1989).

²⁸Ramanujan, "Is there an Indian way of thinking?," 47.

²⁹Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Women, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview," in *Women, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 39.

³⁰Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister*, 205, 210.

³¹See also Susan Seymour, *Women, Family, and Child Care in India: A World in Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 101, 277-278.

³²Brenda E. Brasher, *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 13.

³³Brasher, *Godly Women*, 27, 8-9.

³⁴When I returned to Benares in the fall of 1998, I interviewed several women on videotape. These were, however, repeat interviews with a few highly knowledgeable participants, not new interviews. Hence I do not include those interviews here.

³⁵I have changed the names of all informants quoted in this essay to conceal their identities. Many thanks to Sunita Singh, my research associate, and one very knowledgeable *puja* participant, Kusumlata (not her real name), who worked together to generate pseudonyms that would approximate original names with respect to regional and age associations.

³⁶Seymour, *Women, Family, and Child Care in India*, 279.

³⁷Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister*, 197.

³⁸Elizabeth Collins, *Pierced By Murugan's Lance: Ritual, Power, and Moral Redemption among Malaysian Hindus* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1997), 173.

³⁹Collins, *Pierced By Murugan's Lance*, 182, referring to Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 14; Karen Kapadia, *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste, and Class in Rural South India* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), 7.